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WHY PRESIDENTS STUMBLE

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THE U.S.

has eyes and ears all over the globe. Yet our Presidents often act like someone who is blind and deaf. They seldom seem to anticipate world events of momentous importance. They have been caught napping by revolutions, invasions and other developments of awesome consequence.

Why is the President invariably so late to act that he can only react? I can tell you that it's not from lack of sound information. He is served by professionals who spend their lives sifting fact from fantasy, truth from propaganda. They produce stunningly accurate assessments—which are routinely ignored by the White House. Consider a few examples of warnings that have gone unheeded:

- President Richard Nixon could have prevented the ruinous 40-fold jump in oil prices had he heeded the available warnings. The federal government, with all the agencies that watch over the oil industry, had an immense early-alert system.

- President Jimmy Carter could have spared the nation 444 days of humiliation if he had just paid attention to the State Department's Iranian experts. With startling prescience, they warned of the likelihood of an attack on the embassy and the seizure of hostages.

- President Carter could have stopped Fidel Castro from shipping Cuba's criminals and crazies to Florida, where they have aggravated the crime rate. The CIA submitted at least five advance warn-

ings of Castro's intentions.

- President Carter might have dissuaded the Soviets from invading Afghanistan, thus preventing the breakdown of détente, if he had acted on advance information. He seemed to be the only one in high places who was surprised by the invasion.

- President Ronald Reagan might have been able to avert the Falkland Islands mess had he reacted promptly to intelligence reports that the Argentines would invade. Indeed, the Argentine generals had the false impression that the invasion would have his blessing.

ments that an Israeli invasion was "inevitable." Earlier, the Israeli attack on Iraq's nuclear reactor also was forecast precisely.

In each of these disasters, a President had access to information that would have enabled him to take preventive actions, rather than blunder along. Maybe the correct intelligence never reached the President. Maybe it had been so twisted or toned down that it was easy to ignore. Yet in some cases, I had published the warnings long before events got out of control.

Of course, a President gets bad advice as well as good. Conflicting information comes in from various confidential sources available to him. The real pros among those who provide information have been able to forecast or anticipate events with far more reliability than any President has ever done. The problem is that the politicians around the President either don't know who the reliable experts are or prefer to ignore them.

How does crucial information get cut off at the pass? First, let's examine how a President reaches his decisions.

Though different Presidents have asked for intelligence in different forms, each has received what is known in the intelligence community as the PDB, or President's Daily Brief. The idea is to give a President the most sensitive information U.S. intelligence agencies have gathered in a document he can read in 15 minutes.